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## From Formal Context to Historical Knowledge:

Representations of the Politicians', Public's, and Soldiers' Perspective in *Darkest Hour* (2017) and *Dunkirk* (2017)

Master's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education

Supervisor: Eli Løfaldli

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## Abstract

This master's thesis analyses how Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour* and Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*, both from 2017, mediate the past by using the historical film genre as their mode of expression. The films' formal surface, through *mise-en-scène* and *mise-en-histoire*, is analyzed in order to understand how they represent historical knowledge through the medium of film. The premise of the thesis is that all history is an interpretation of the past, and historical representation, whether published in academic research or mediated through film, inherits some degree of truth-value as long as its content is based on past events or people. Both *Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk* depict the events of Operation Dynamo through their modelling and figuration of the historical world, functioning as a source to historical knowledge and representation. *Darkest Hour* depicts the political machinations behind the scenes of Operation Dynamo, portraying Winston Churchill as an isolated leader who fought his battles alone with a great and determined sense of direction and leadership. The film mediates a representation of a united Britain, emphasizing strong leadership and a national triumph. In contrast, *Dunkirk* depicts the perspective of soldiers and the public and relies on the Theory of Mind to engage the audience with an empathic connection to the events and characters portrayed on screen. By producing historical knowledge through the assertion of a credible historical experience, the film portrays a realistic, yet fictional, account of events with attention to historical details. Both films reinforce a sense of national unity, and the analysis acknowledges the importance of the subject of historical films in relation to collective memory in a postcolonial British context. The thesis concludes that historical films have a close relationship with national identity and nationhood, and, in a British context, they are important for redefining the collective self-image.

## Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven tar for seg hvordan Joe Wrights *Darkest Hour* og Christopher Nolans *Dunkirk*, begge fra 2017, formidler fortiden ved hjelp av den historiske filmsjangeren som uttrykksform. Oppgaven analyserer filmenes formelle aspekter, inkludert *mise-en-scène* og *mise-en-histoire*, for å forstå hvordan de representerer historisk kunnskap gjennom filmmediet. Utgangspunktet for oppgaven er at all historie er en tolkning av fortiden og at historiske fremstillinger, enten de publiseres i akademisk forskning eller formidles gjennom film, har en viss grad av sannhetsverdi så lenge de bygger på og tar utgangspunkt i tidligere hendelser eller personer. Både *Darkest Hour* og *Dunkirk* skildrer hendelsene under Operation Dynamo ved å modellere og figurere den historiske verden, og fungerer med det som kilder til historisk kunnskap og representasjon. *Darkest Hour* fokuserer på de politiske manøvrene bak kulissene i Operation Dynamo og portretterer Winston Churchill som en isolert leder som kjempet alene, men med målrettet og sterkt lederskap. Filmen formidler en representasjon av et forent Storbritannia og vektlegger betydningen av sterk ledelse for nasjonal triumf. På den andre siden skildrer *Dunkirk* perspektivet til soldatene og befolkningen, og bruker Theory of Mind for å engasjere publikum, samt skape en empatisk forbindelse til hendelsene og karakterene som blir portrettert på skjermen. Ved å skape historisk kunnskap gjennom en troverdig historisk opplevelse, presenterer filmen en realistisk, men fiktiv, fremstilling av historiske hendelser med fokus på historiske detaljer. Begge filmene forsterker en følelse av nasjonal enhet, og analysen erkjenner viktigheten av historiske filmer i forhold til kollektiv hukommelse i en postkolonial britisk kontekst. Oppgaven konkluderer med at historiske filmer har et tett forhold til nasjonal identitet og nasjonsbygging, og i en britisk kontekst er de viktige for å redefinere det kollektive selvbildet.

## **Acknowledgments**

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

On 14 May 1940, an announcement was sent out by BBC on behalf of the British Admiralty: “The Admiralty have made an Order requesting all owners of self-propelled pleasure craft between 30 [foot] and 100 [foot] in length to send all particulars to the Admiralty within 14 days from today if they have not already been offered or requisitioned” (Mace, chap.12). Britain was at war with Germany and their troops were on the verge of collapsing into the hands of the Nazis who had by then made major advances into French territory. After what has been known as the Phoney War and the inevitable surrender of Belgium, the British Army found itself in Dunkirk, left standing with its back against the English Channel, facing a seemingly unstoppable enemy led by Adolf Hitler. With nowhere to go and nowhere to hide, they could only hope for one thing: a miracle.

It is in this context, and in these surroundings, that the unlikely, yet extraordinary, events of Operation Dynamo took place. Operation Dynamo was a military operation which called for the British public to aid and assist the Royal Navy by sailing over the English Channel with their own small boats, little ships, and merchant vessels and bringing their troops home. This home would have been very different to what it is today had the successful evacuation of nearly 340,000 British and French troops from the beaches of Dunkirk not taken place between May 26 and June 4, 1940 (Maguire 258). The evacuation has therefore an important status today:

This event [... has] attained a near-legendary status among the British and, indeed, throughout the English-speaking world. Even at the time people spoke of the “Dunkirk spirit” – the idea that the whole nation was pulling together in the face of intense danger, ready to face and resist anything the enemy might offer (Maguire 256).

The evacuation can be seen as a moment of national pride and greatness, and is deeply embedded in British collective memory – the social phenomenon where a collective remembering of the past becomes a dynamic entity subject to reinterpretation in time and space (Maurantonio 3). The Dunkirk spirit: “an attitude of being very strong in a difficult situation and refusing to accept defeat” (‘The Dunkirk Spirit’), shown by the brave public in a difficult time for the nation, is perhaps one of the key elements of why this story is still being remembered – even 80 years after it happened.

In the collective memory of the past, there is also the remembering of Churchill as a great leader in the nation's "finest hour" (Hassan 68). Here, one can look to Winston Churchill's famous speech to the House of Commons on June 4, 1940:

We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old (Churchill in Maguire 270).

In the words of the contemporary Edward R. Murrow, with this speech, "[Churchill] mobilized the English language and sent it into battle" (Bliss Jr 237) at a time where Britain, perhaps more than ever, needed to be united. They needed to be united in their will to stand side by side with the French, in their will to defend their island, and ultimately, in their will to fight back against whatever force the Nazis of Germany would come at them with. The story of Dunkirk remembers Churchill as a leader who stood alone against the Nazi behemoth (Hassan 68), and saved the country from invasion even when facing the gravest of odds. For Churchill, surrender was not an option, and to be able to fight back at the threat of invasion, he first had to mobilize and unite his fellow countrymen and women – both the public, the soldiers, and the politicians.

This event, showing signs of patriotic heroism, of great leadership, and a united Britain in desperate times – in their darkest hour – has been retold and narrated on multiple occasions since the war, both in academic research and in popular culture. In 2017, two separate films were released to the public depicting the historical events of Operation Dynamo: *Darkest Hour*, the mainstream cinema film directed by Joe Wright (*Darkest Hour*), and *Dunkirk*, the art cinema film directed by Christopher Nolan (*Dunkirk*). This thesis will analyse both films in relation to their historical context, and discuss how the two of them, together, function as a source to useful and important historical knowledge and representations of a collective memory. The two films complement each other in depicting the events surrounding the evacuation. While *Darkest Hour* primarily follows Churchill's decision-making in the behind-the-scenes political machinations in London, *Dunkirk* considers the evacuation process from a range of fictional desperate soldiers on the beaches, the pilots in the air, and the public who sails across the Channel to evacuate the soldiers. The two films share a focus on the Dunkirk spirit and how Britain became united against their common enemy, and together, they show a picture of how politicians,

soldiers, and the public all were on the same page, patriotic and filled with hope, courage, and bravery heading into the next phase of the war during the summer of 1940. Other noteworthy instances where the history of these events has been portrayed and explored through film, are Leslie Norman's *Dunkirk* (1958) and Joe Wright's *Atonement* (2007). However, this thesis will not delve into these particular examples.

The mediations of Operation Dynamo, with a focus on national identity – an important genre feature in the historical film (Chapman 6) – tell us that identity is a key part of why history is important today. When we as individuals present ourselves and who we are, we often tend to do so by telling stories of our past, about our lives, where we come from, our origins and what we have done in our lives until the present (Kaldal 165). The same pattern is also seen in nations that seek to present themselves: they do so by looking to the past, to the qualities of the people, to historical events which have defined who they are, and perhaps also who they want to be. This has also been true for Britain, where the British have looked to the war for examples of great national values for a long time:

Assumptions of uniqueness and superiority vis-à-vis continental neighbours both as an imperial power and as an ultimate victor in war were widely shared. [...] Never subjected to German invasion and occupation, Britain's war against the Axis power [...] remains firmly embedded as its 'finest hour' in national mythology until the present day (Buettner 440).

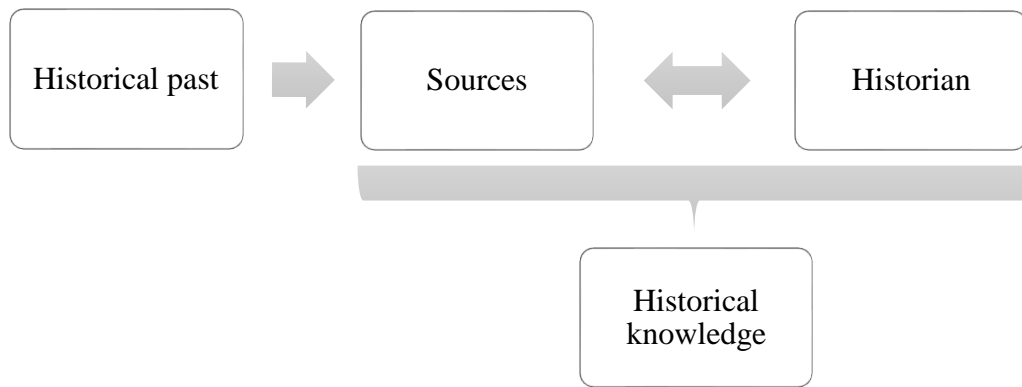
For Britain, a nation which has often been described as divided (J. White 4), it has in other words not been unusual to look at their wartime victories in a search for a more unified national identity. Operation Dynamo is no exception in this regard.

James Chapman argues that historical feature films will have as much to say about the present as it has to say about the past (Chapman 1). The implication of this is that the past and history are not only something we bring to the screen because we are interested in something that has already happened, but that we use it to either make sense of or point to what is occurring today. The social and historical problems, conflicts, issues, and contradictions which provide a film's thematic focus and content, is referred to as social context. According to Bill Nichols, this source turns our attention beyond the formal features of a film to issues that are not specific to the medium, but, rather, the culture and times in which the film appears (Nichols 12). However, a film, broadly speaking, relies on both a social and formal context as the two primary sources for its shape (Nichols 12). Whereas the social context focuses on the film's thematic content, the formal context – which involves a film's medium-specific qualities – deals with the

aesthetics and film techniques used in the film's representation of its story (Nichols 12). This thesis will rely on both the social and the formal context as a framework for the analysis. The primary focus, however, will be on the formal context, since the social issues the historical film may refer to metaphorically, are not likely to sustain viewer interest for long if the film's formal surface lacks plausibility or appeal (Nichols 13).

By conducting a comparative analysis of *Darkest Hour* (2017) and *Dunkirk* (2017), the main focus, then, will be to investigate and analyse how Wright and Nolan mediate the past using the historical film genre as their mode of expression. As will be explained further, the premise for the thesis is that all history is necessarily narrative, and whether the representations of the past are published in historical journals or projected onto the screen, they nonetheless produce historical knowledge. Using the formal context (while also commenting on the social context of the films) as a framework for the analysis, allows for an analytical separation between the mode of representation and historical knowledge. Historically, there has been tension in the field between mediation and knowledge, and it is therefore of interest to this thesis to analyse how the two historical films use and relate to the historical past. The thesis will thus consist of two separate analyses of the films' formal context where I focus on how the *mise-en-scène* – the composition of the image (Nichols 60) – and *mise-en-histoire* – “the imaginative referentialization of the historical worlds constructed by a film” (Greiner 76) – create and represent a historical diegesis within the film. I argue that such films can function as a great source to history: both as it serves as a source to historical knowledge and as a source to different mediations about the past and our collective memory.

Before I conduct the analysis of the two films, however, it is important to clarify the premise for my argument. As stated in the introduction, the premise for this thesis is my argument that all history, whether it is published in an academic journal or to the popular audience through screen, is an interpretation of the past. Whatever the historian's purpose and choice of medium may be, they will have to engage with the source material that is available to them in order to produce history. As seen in the figure below (Clausen 44), one must differentiate between what is referred to as the *historical past* and the product which will be called *historical knowledge*. Whereas the former refers to the actual events that took place in history, the latter refers to our knowledge about said past. However, our historical knowledge, which can also be referred to as *produced history*, relies on the interaction between the historian and the available source material:



*Figure 1: The relationship between historical past and historical knowledge*

In the case of historical film, I argue that the filmmakers take on the role of the historian, and by interacting with available sources of the historical past, create and mediate historical knowledge through film. Although there has been a widely discussed discourse regarding the authenticity and truth-value in film as opposed to more scientific approaches to history, one could argue that all history writing is necessarily narrative (Greiner 20) as it is more or less a narrated version of the past and dependent on the writing style of the historian. However, the choice for the historian’s writing is more a matter of individual style and preferences than of content. According to Hayden White, it is the actual content, which is based on the interpretation of the sources, that alone has truth-value (18). The narrative form, which is closely linked to that of storytelling,

adds nothing to the content of the representation, but is rather a simulacrum of the structure and processes of real events. And insofar as this representation resembles the events of which it is a representation, it can be taken as a true account. The story told in the narrative is a “mimesis” of the story lived in some region of historical reality, and insofar as it is an accurate imitation it is to be considered a truthful account thereof (H. White 3).

One can then argue that the historical film inherits a truth-value as long as its contents are based on the historical past. However, using James Chapman’s definition of the genre label, the historical film is a narrower label than those of costume film, period film, and heritage film as its narrative is not only set in the past, but is in itself historical as it “is based, however loosely, on actual historical events or real historical persons” (2). In other words, the historical film’s narrative and characters are based on real events or people from the recorded, historical past, and excludes films that happen to be set in the past but are predominately fictional narratives. This does not, however, mean that a historical film cannot have elements of both fiction and

real events and/or people, as is the case with *Dunkirk* where a range of fictional characters are included in the mediation of a real historical event.

In this context, the historical film genre places itself in the tension between fiction and fact. Although the historical film is based on the historical past and presented as historical knowledge, the representation itself is fictional. The audio-visual picture of history is presented by actors and filmmakers and not through real pictures of the past. When Gary Oldman portrays Churchill in *Darkest Hour*, it is not the real Churchill that is shown on screen, but rather a representation of him. In film studies, this can be referred to as the Theory of Blending where every character on screen can be referred to as a blend, providing a crucial link between the filmmakers' and viewers' minds (William 27). For the filmmaker, the character is a blend as it becomes a "compressed composite figure based on its creator's own experiences with real people" (27), and for the viewer the character is a blend as something existing in the film's diegesis rather than the real world, "but which also comes to inhabit the real-world viewer's mind as a new mental space" (27).

The same is true for the historical characters on screen which become a blend as the filmmakers' and viewers' prior knowledge and collective memory influences the experience and perception of whether they are to be perceived as real or not (27). As the historical film operates in the tension between fact and fiction by providing a representation of a recorded reality, it then becomes an adaptation of the historical past. For the mediation of the adaptation to be perceived as real, films rely on the suspension of disbelief and the audience's willingness to accept the reality presented in a film, despite it containing fictional characters or historical inaccuracies. However, insofar as the film manages to be perceived as real by the audience, it becomes a mode of historical expression.

In the tension between fiction and fact, the historical film makes history available to a broad audience. Film is an accessible medium and engages the audience's emotions, and thus also their interest. Although it might have historical inaccuracies and flaws, it makes history available to the popular audience, which would not be possible if the only alternative is mediums with a less engaging approach. Historical film has thus become important for the public's historical knowledge, interests, and views about history. The implication that historical film can be a mode of historical expression, is supported by Rasmus Greiner, who emphasises how facts themselves are a product of representation and cannot exist or be known prior to this



(19). It is only through the narration of the past that the historical knowledge is known, and whatever the chosen medium for the representation is, given that the film's content is based on the recorded past's events or persons, then the history-on-screen must be acknowledged as a valid and accessible mode of historical expression.

However, it is important to acknowledge that when viewing film as a source to history, it requires more of us than just to let the audio-visual stimuli a film offers simply wash over us without coming to serious terms with the film's content. As Jeffrey Lantis argues, film is not a passive medium (234), and an engaged audience must examine, reflect, and critically assess a film's message, design and themes in order for it to have an effect beyond mere entertainment. This does, however, give the historical film a lot of potential as the film, according to Greiner,

addresses the spectator's entire body. We do not merely see and hear the filmic figuration of a historical world; rather, it completely surrounds us, so that it is as if we can physically feel it. Although we are aware that this living encounter with history is based on perceiving an audiovisual construction—a histosphere—the filmic experience of world corresponds closely to our everyday perceptions, which the film experience extends to spheres of past time that are inaccessible outside of cinema (7).

For the historical film to make any serious impact on us, and for it to be viewed as a representation of the past, it requires us to pay close attention to the interaction of the film's formal context through for example its *mise-en-scène*, editing and sound (McFarlane 16). How we perceive the historical in a film is primarily based on the audio-visual elements and can be seen through the arrangement of characters in space and the spatial relations in time (Greiner 91). This is done through the film's *mise-en-scène* “which constitutes the filmic space, organising ‘all visible and audible elements, both intraframe and interframe’” (91). In other words, the *mise-en-scène* configures the world within the film by organising the performative act and staging the world created by it, whilst also being part of its representation.

In regard to historical film, however, Greiner suggests adding a new term: the *mise-en-histoire*. Whereas the *mise-en-scène* stages the audio-visual world, the *mise-en-histoire* establishes a relation to collective and individual conceptions of the historical past by creating a referential to “the world formed out of the film's audiovisual figurations in popular historical consciousness and reciprocally links it to the spectators' individual conceptions of history” (93). Through the *mise-en-histoire* the filmmakers interweave the characters with popular historical narratives and cast them into a certain picture of history, which, according to Greiner, affirms White's thesis that history is necessarily narrative (93). The *mise-en-histoire* is also important

in relation to the film's social context, because which referential link is being presented to the audience, reveals important aspects of our collective memory of the past. Analysing both the *mise-en-scène* and the *mise-en-histoire* is thus especially important when using film as a source to, and not just an image of, history, as it is through the organisation of the audio-visual, combined with the interweaved referential link to the historical past, that the representation and mediation of the historical knowledge reveals itself.

## Chapter 2: Representations of the Public's and Politicians' Perspective in *Darkest Hour*

The aforementioned elements of a film's *mise-en-scène* and *mise-en-histoire*, combined with its editing and sound, form part of the film's formal context. Together with the film's social context, its formal context functions as one of two sources to a film's shape and is therefore an important subject for analysis. As already mentioned, “[i]f the formal surface of a film lacks plausibility or appeal, the social issues it may refer to metaphorically are not likely to sustain viewer interest for very long.” (Nichols 13). It is therefore important to pay close attention to the filmmakers' choices regarding camera placement, use of diegetic and extra-diegetic sound, and character placement, as it determines whether or not we find the narration plausible. Further, when engaging with historical films such as *Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk*, it becomes useful to distinguish between and analyse “what is happening” and “what really happened” as “‘What really happened’ is an indispensable if mostly only indirectly evoked part of the viewing engagement with ‘what is happening’, an awareness of *historicality*” (Corner 2). In the following two chapters, I will therefore analyse the formal context, seen through both films' *mise-en-scène* and *mise-en-histoire*, in order to discuss how they create a historical world to mediate the historical past.

Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour* is set in London, and its primary focus is on representing the difficult first days of Winston Churchill's tenure as Prime Minister in May 1940. Through the lens of mainstream cinema – storytelling based on the principles of realism and genres (Nichols 137) – the film offers a perspective on the political machinations that took place behind-the-scenes from the moment Churchill took office until the evacuation process of Operation Dynamo. Under immense pressure, Churchill has to make difficult decisions leading up to the evacuation of the entire British Army from the beaches of Dunkirk. However, whilst doing so, he also has to convince his fellow politicians, both supporters and contenders, that “you cannot reason with a tiger when your head is in its mouth!” (*Darkest Hour* 1:07:08) – meaning that Britain cannot enter into negotiations with Hitler when the threat of invasion is imminent, without any form of leverage.

To establish the historical context of the events that are to play out, the film starts with almost a minute of archival footage and films from the war with accompanying text. The audience is immediately introduced to and made aware of the circumstances surrounding the film's diegesis, which is the narrative of the story world occupied by the film's characters (Nichols 49). During the first minute, before the film enters the House of Commons in a fiery debate, the context is provided to the audience in text:

9 May 1940

Hitler has invaded the Czechoslovakia,  
Poland, Denmark and Norway

3 million German troops are now poised  
on the Belgian border, ready to conquer  
the rest of Europe

In Britain, Parliament has lost faith  
in its leader, Neville Chamberlain

The search for a replacement  
has already begun...

(*Darkest Hour* 01:27-01:46).

The immediate assertion of the film's context through archival footage and the use of overlaying extra-diegetic text – text outside of the characters' story world (Nichols 49) – is one means by which Wright establishes historical context in the film. This can be referred to as an “archive effect” where a feeling of authenticity is generated through the immediate assertion of the historical context which “awakens a desire for direct, affective contact with the past” (Greiner 28). The white text on a dark background is common for extra-diegetic intertitles and title cards, and also commonly used in the assertion of history in sound films when adding the wider context of a specific story (Chion 44). By creating a link to history by using real pictures, whilst simultaneously providing historical context through text, *Darkest Hour* asserts its own status as history, which is a common characteristic of the historical film (Chapman 4). This introduction gives enough background for the audience to understand that when the film enters the House of Commons, it is in the context of the replacement of Neville Chamberlain as the Prime Minister with Winston Churchill, thus setting the scene for what is to follow.

The archive effect gives the film a “credible historical experience” (Greiner 29). According to Greiner, the authenticity feeling in historical film is dual and contains two interrelated aspects:

a feeling of credible experience and a feeling of credible historical referentiality (29). The archive effect used in *Darkest Hour* does both. First, it provides a credible experience through the use of archival footage, and second, it creates a referential link to the historical past through the use of intertitles and the setting of the scene. Using archival footage followed by fictional footage creates an effect where the fictional enters the real and the two are blended together. The fictional elements become an extension of the recorded past, adding to the experience of historical knowledge. By doing so, *Darkest Hour* asserts its own status as history, enabling its own fictional footage shot in modern times to be viewed as a recording of the past.

Wright also creates historical credibility by providing both experience and historical referentiality through the use of diegetic radio messages. When Mrs. Leyton enters Churchill's room to deliver a telegram, she finds Churchill, his wife, and some of his staff listening to the radio. The message conveyed is:

This is BBC Home Service. Here is a short news bulletin. The German army invaded Holland and Belgium early this morning, by land, and land parachutes [...] The Armies of the Low Countries are resisting. An appeal for help has been made to the Allied governments and Brussels says the Allied troops are moving to their support [...] A hundred warplanes were seen over Brussels, and it is now reported that in the first war over Brussel, several hundred people were killed and wounded, and several buildings destroyed (*Darkest Hour* 11:45-12:30).

This scene is introduced by aural cues through the diegetic sound of the radio, leading Mrs. Leyton to the off-screen space that is Churchill's bedroom. As Nichols explains, the diegetic sound "can be manipulated to serve the dramatic and emotional needs of the story" (65). In this scene, the dramatic and emotional suspense is generated by the radio message as it becomes news not only to the viewer, but also to the characters themselves as the message unfolds. As it is diegetic, the characters can respond to the historical news, and the message thus provides historical context for them as well as for the audience. In my research it has not been possible to determine whether or not this news bulletin indeed was broadcast or not, but the scene shows how important such bulletins of war became in Britain as BBC achieved a status of vital importance among the British public: "Whatever its content, good or bad, the 9 p.m. news bulletin became in most households an institution almost as sacrosanct as family prayers are said once to have been" (Hannon 178). The aural cues in the scene create a referential link to the historical past in which the narration takes place, and places both the viewer and characters in the collective memory of the past. The film's *mise-en-histoire* thus interweaves the characters in the popular historical narrative by being placed in a room with contemporary radio messages,

which adds to the historical credibility as the fictional footage of the scene is linked with a credible historical experience.

Other such examples of referential links to the historical past are seen throughout the whole film as the narrative progresses. Just before the story moves from the 10 May to 13 May, which is signalled by intertitles, Churchill and another politician are about to enter Parliament. In their conversation as they ascend the stairs, Churchill says: “Belgium was a ploy. They just punched through the Ardennes into France and crossed the Meuse in under 24 hours!” (*Darkest Hour* 22:00). Through the transition from one scene to another, the dialogue between the characters provides context for the viewers, placing them in the historical space and time as they listen to what is being said. A similar example is found in a discussion in the War Cabinet as General Ironside provides the latest updates to Churchill:

Belgium and Holland may fall at any hour [...] The entire French ninth army, some two hundred thousand men have capitulated [...] Surrendered. Deserted. It was a rout. All our land forces, roughly 300,000 men, are now in full retreat [...] The road to Paris now lies open. 7 million refugees are on the move. Collectively we are looking at the collapse of Western Europe in a few days (*Darkest Hour* 30:30-31:39).

This effect is also achieved in the representation of the War Cabinet discussions on 25 May when Dunkirk is first brought up in the film:

As of 2200 hours last night – the Germans have encircled sixty British, Belgian and French divisions. On our part all our forces under Lord Gort have now withdrawn, or are trying to withdraw, to the French coast, to Dunkirk, where we cannot reach them [...] we can see no clear way to rescue them [...] (*Darkest Hour* 46:50-47:25).

Through such dialogues, the film links itself with history which the audience can partake in as listeners, and creates a historical experience of the past for them. Greiner uses the term *histosphere* when referring to the sphere of a “cinematically modeled, physically experienceable historical world” (2) and argues that such *histospheres* are essential to all historical film as it makes the past present in the modelling and figuration of the historical world (2). Even though the dialogues might be fictional and imagined, albeit based on real events, the film enables an immediate experience of history as the events of the past are presented in the present, in the here-and-now, and made available for the audience as historical knowledge.

The historical link between the present and the past can also be found in the mediation of the film’s characters. Although they are played by actors, and are thus in themselves fictional, they are based on real people from the past. The representation and portrayal of Churchill in *Darkest*

*Hour* is based on the filmmakers' interpretation of the collective memory of the former Prime Minister. Here, the collective memory becomes a key aspect, as the mediation of the past events only shows one version of the past, and not necessarily the whole picture.

As Gerry Hassan argues, although *Darkest Hour* portrays the parliamentary machinations when Britain was under their greatest threat, the film mostly ignores the critical role of the Labour Party in these debates (Hassan 70). Despite Clement Attlee's opening speech to the House of Commons and his instrumental role in triggering the vote of no confidence against Neville Chamberlain, the movie presents a partial perspective that is mostly focused on the Tories (Hassan 71). While the film acknowledges and places Attlee as part of Churchill's War Cabinet when Churchill is asked to compose it: "Composition of your War Cabinet. Who should sit on it? [...] that sheep in sheep's clothing, Attlee" (*Darkest Hour* 19:35-19:56), it nonetheless privileges the portrayal of Chamberlain and Halifax, who are depicted as Churchill's political enemies which he seeks to keep close. In fact, although Attlee and his fellow party member Greenwood were central in the War Cabinet discussions in May 1940, taking side with Churchill in the discussions on finding out what Hitler could propose in terms of peace terms (Hassan 71), the whole drama pictured in the film regarding these Cabinet discussions mainly revolves around three people: Churchill, Chamberlain, and Halifax. Ultimately, *Darkest Hour* reduces the complex dynamics of the Cabinet's debates to a narrative that revolves around the perspectives of three men and overlooks the crucial contributions of other key actors.

Although it is accepted by historians that he had supporters of his political views within the War Cabinet, Churchill is often depicted as fighting his battles alone in the representation of *Darkest Hour*. This is shown in the scene following the War Cabinet meeting on May 25 when Churchill is alone with Halifax and Chamberlain. Following the order to send the garrison at Calais east towards the German lines in order to distract them from the entire British army in Dunkirk, Churchill faces reservations from the others in the room – even from Attlee, who proclaims it would be suicide to sacrifice the four thousand men in Calais for such a mission (*Darkest Hour* 49:18). In the following meeting between Churchill and his two main competitors, he yet again finds himself alone (albeit voluntarily, as he requested the meeting) in a two-against-one-situation (*Darkest Hour* 52:00-54:20). The film depicts the tension between the three men and their opposing views on the issue of peace talks. It becomes evident that all three men have the same goal and are acting from their desire to save Britain, but through different measures.

Halifax, who urges Churchill to be rational, is portrayed in the film as someone who sees beyond Churchill's rhetoric (Hassan 70): "once France falls, Germany can concentrate on aircraft production, they will then have the French fleet as well! What is to stop Herr Hitler then? Winston? Words, words, words alone?" (*Darkest Hour* 53:34). The tension in their relationship culminates in a heated discussion after the following War Cabinet meeting on 26 May. After threatening to resign if Churchill refuses to enter into peace talks, Halifax shuts the door on Churchill, leaving him standing distressed and alone in a dark room, only seen through a small window on the closed door.

Throughout the film, Churchill is often portrayed in tight and confined spaces which emphasise his isolation, and potentially his stubbornness, as he is depicted holding views without any apparent support from others. These shots frame Churchill in a way that separates him from the other characters in the film, leaving him detached from the other politicians. The image of the closed door and sharply framed window is an example of this: the *mise-en-scène* places Churchill within a tight frame, zooming in on him by using a medium close shot – a commonly used shot when you want the person photographed to dominate the screen (Nichols 51) and place emphasis on what is going on inside their minds.

The same sense of entrapment or confinement can be found during the Roosevelt phone call scene where Churchill, in a dark, tight and confined bathroom, calls his ally, Franklin D. Roosevelt, to ask for help (*Darkest Hour* 54:30-58:17). As John White explains, this is a repeatedly used effect in the film, as Churchill is framed in such a way to suggest that he is trapped by events (109). To the left of Churchill there is a clock ticking, showing the audience that time is of the essence to find a solution. Their conversation, which at first is shot with a medium close shot, becomes a close-up when Churchill leans into the camera: "I need not impress upon you the trouble faced by the Western Hemisphere. Without your support, in some fashion [...] Mr. President... We are facing the gravest odds". The use of close-up in this scene directs the attention to details in Churchill's facial expression (Nichols 51), and emphasises the importance of the situation. Almost without blinking, his eyes are desperate, yet he is also confused at the lacking solution provided to him by Roosevelt. Frustrated, he hangs up as the camera shifts to a sideshot of him sitting leaned back into the wall. The frame of the shot is enclosed and shown in a tall rectangle with all black outside of the lamplit room (*Darkest Hour* 57:23-57:55), thus framing him in a way which makes both the physical room he is sitting in, and the situation, appear tight, confined, and trapped.



The sense of isolation is, however, not only depicted by placing Churchill in tight, confined spaces. When the clock seems to tick towards the darkest hour, after Churchill has wavered in his firm stand to not enter into negotiations, he finds himself sitting alone on a rooftop looking out over London (*Darkest Hour* 1:25:30-1:26:25). In this scene, which is shot at night, Churchill seems lost and defeated. While looking up to the sky and the planes passing by, his eyes are wet, and he looks both tired and afraid. The shot starts with a close-up of his facial expressions before it zooms out and reveals the larger city. Zoom shots like these are often used to convey a subjective or impressionistic view of the scene (Nichols 56), and as it zooms out, it shows Churchill's subjective impression that he is both alone and very small in the larger scheme of things. As the city reveals itself, Churchill disappears in the shot, which adds to the sense of hopelessness that is conveyed through the isolation of Churchill. Although powerful in his role, as a person he cannot do much alone.

However, as White points out, "The darkest hour is just before the dawn", suggesting that the film, with its title and repeated entrapment of Churchill, implies from the outset that the film is going to have a triumphant ending (J. White 110). This is common for mainstream cinema which, with its usual linear plot and causality, often tends to end with resolution or closure to the characters' obstacles and initial problems (Nichols 139). It is perhaps not coincidental, then, that the darkest hour of Churchill's determination to stand firm against the Nazis, is shot at night, just before dawn. However, the start of the turning point, which in mainstream cinema often occurs in the middle of the narrative as the story unfolds in ascending and descending action that pivots around the climax of the problem (Nichols 143), is marked by the aforementioned bathroom scene at the midway mark of the film.

Before that, however, Churchill rushes into the map room and calls Admiral Ramsey, issuing the order of *Operation Dynamo*: "I want you to order an assembly of boats [...] anyone with a pleasure craft bigger than 30 foot that can get to France [...] Help me stage this thing, Bertie. We must at least try to bring some of our boys home." (*Darkest Hour* 59:11-1:00:15). Although, in reality, Admiral Ramsey was the one appointed to take command of the planning and execution of the evacuation (Welch 47), this scene portrays Churchill as the man who had the idea – making it a fictional representation of events where Churchill is shaped in the collective memory as the mind behind the assembly of boats. Although this is not a factual depiction of events, it shows Churchill as a determined leader who manages to turn the situation around.

This is followed by Churchill showing the V for Victory sign to journalists through his car window in the following transition scene, which foreshadows the triumphant ending.

Even though the film depicts Churchill as being under severe pressure, he remains portrayed as confident and self-sufficient almost throughout the entire film. These are characteristics of Churchill's personality which are accepted by historians today. According to Doug Moran, Churchill's determination and extraordinary self-efficacy was something he brought with him after the "wilderness years" where his "ideas were unpopular or out of step with the mainstream" (50). During one of his greatest pre-war political challenges, when his party lost political power in 1929, Churchill was commonly ignored and put in a place of political isolation (Moran 50). In other words, being under pressure and without support, was not unfamiliar to Churchill when he took office in May 1940, thus making him able to stand strong in his views and come up with a solution, even when facing opposition within his own cabinet. In the film, on the other hand, although a plan has been set in motion after his phone call with Admiral Ramsey, it is not dawn just yet after the aforementioned turning point. Churchill, relying on his own self-sufficiency and stubbornness, still has to convince the War Cabinet, the public, and the King that he is right in his unwavering opinion to stand firm.

The relationship between Churchill and George VI develops throughout the film. At first, they seem distant, and it becomes apparent that the King wanted Halifax as Chamberlain's successor (*Darkest Hour* 15:10), which was also true in real life as Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister in 1940 was met with scepticism by George VI who "bitterly opposed" his appointment due to Churchill's untrustworthiness and instability (Cannadine 262). George VI's reluctance towards appointing Churchill is depicted in the film when Chamberlain hands in his resignation, where the King cites that "Winston lacks judgement" as his main source of concern (*Darkest Hour* 15:49).

In the film's first meeting between Churchill and the King, they are physically placed far apart from each other, underscoring the tension and reluctance in their relationship (*Darkest Hour* 17:00-18:51). The scene's *mise-en-scène* is notable for its use of lighting with both Churchill and the King standing in front of each their own window in the dark room. They are both standing in the natural light coming from the outside, but between them, there is a barrier of darkness. With the use of low key lighting, only parts of the frame are well lit, causing vivid contrasts, plenty of shadows and a dramatic effect (Nichols 58). In this scene the lighting is

used to depict the tension between the two characters. There is an undefined power dynamic between the two of them due to their relationship and the King's lack of admiration of Churchill. However, in order to start the process of their working cooperation, Churchill has to accept George VI's request to form a government. In so doing, Churchill exits his own light, enters the dark barrier between them, and kisses the King's hand on the other side of the room.

The next time they are placed together in the same frame is during one of their weekly luncheons (*Darkest Hour* 1:00:25-1:03:17), which Churchill, in real life, regularly had with the King even though he was titanically busy (Cannadine 263). During their lunch, they sit closer to each other. There is no longer a barrier of shadow and a whole room between them, but rather just a table. The lighting is placed on the King as he sits with his face towards the window, and Churchill has his back against it. Placing Churchill in the dark, further emphasises how he is trapped by events. However, even though the King is well lit, and Churchill is not, there is no barrier between them anymore other than a table – a table on which their common lunch is served. This luncheon depicts the beginning of their developing relationship as they open up about their personal life to one another, and depicts how Churchill and George VI eventually, and quite gradually, developed a fond relationship to one another in real life (Cannadine 263).

The final time the film places Churchill and George VI in the same room, is on 27 May in Churchill's bedroom (*Darkest Hour* 1:28:14-1:32:25). The room is dark, and Churchill seems old and defeated. There is only one light source: a bulb hanging from the middle of the room. The King wants an update from Churchill on the war and whether the nation is about to enter into peace talks with Hitler or not. He wants Churchill's opinion; however, Churchill seems to be lacking both confidence and a solution: "I am most terribly [afraid]. The support in the War Cabinet for a campaign of resistance has collapsed" (*Darkest Hour* 1:29:55). Churchill finds himself in total isolation and without any support. At this moment, however, the King approaches him from the other side of the room and sits next to him on the bed. For the first time, they are sitting shoulder to shoulder under the same light, and with no border between them. George VI then says:

You have my support [...] we shall work together; you shall have my support at any hour [...] You once gave me some advice. Perhaps I can give you some. Go to the people. Let them instruct you. Quite silently, they usually do. But tell them the truth. Unvarnished.

Churchill responds: "On certain matters I have few people with whom I can talk, frankly". The King then suggests to Churchill: "Perhaps now we have each other?". This scene is important

as it not only depicts the improved relationship between the two characters, but it also gives Churchill support in an otherwise isolated situation.

In 1941, through an instance of correspondence between Churchill and George VI initiated by the King sending his best wishes for the new year, Churchill replied that the “sovereign's support had been 'a constant source of strength’” (Cannadine 263), showing that Churchill at least had the support of the King. Furthermore, in the same reply, Churchill concluded that the war “‘drawn the throne and the people more closely together than was ever before recorded', and George VI and Queen Elizabeth were 'more beloved by all classes and conditions than any of the princes of the past’” (Cannadine 263). With this in mind, going back to the bedroom scene, perhaps the most significant part of the exchange is not necessarily the King’s professed support of Churchill, but the mention of the people, the public: the King advises Churchill to listen to his nation as they would also need to be on board with the plan for Britain to be united.

The film depicts the relationship between Churchill and the public as an important hurdle of which Churchill has to overcome and manage to develop a relationship with. Author George Orwell wrote after the war that Churchill was a “‘tough and humorous old man’, whom the British people ‘would not accept as a peacetime leader but whom in the moment of disaster they felt to be representative of themselves’” (Hassan 73). Yet, throughout the film Churchill’s relationship with the public is depicted as difficult as Churchill fails to relate to the public. During the first shot including the public, a continuous tracking shot of people in motion seen from Churchill’s viewpoint as he drives past them in his car, Churchill confesses to his driver:

You know, I have never ridden a bus. Never queued for bread. I believe I can boil an egg but only because I saw it done once [...] The only time I tried to ride the Underground was during the General Strike. Clemmie dropped me at South Kensington station. I went down, but I got lost and came straight back up. Awful! (*Darkest Hour* 13:50-15:10).

The scene is shot from the perspective and point of view of Churchill, which is a frequently used technique to increase our emotional identification with the character as the audience sees what the character sees (Nichols 42). During the second shot, which presents Churchill in the back of the car looking out, the audience sees Churchill looking disconnected from the people outside. Not only in physical space as he is inside his car whereas they are on the outside running their everyday errands and going to work, but also emotionally as he is unable to connect to them. According to Moran, Churchill was born into one of Britain’s most prestigious families, growing up experiencing nothing but privilege (Moran 49). Churchill probably never had to do

any activities which were common to the ordinary public at this time, such as taking the bus, queuing for bread, boiling an egg or riding the underground. Due to his lack of experience with such mundane activities, he is therefore depicted as unable to relate to the public, and thus also connect to them.

Churchill's inability to relate to the public is also depicted through the repeated mumbling of words when speaking to his secretary, Mrs Leyton. She is warned that this might occur when briefed about the job: "He mumbles, so it's almost impossible to catch everything" (*Darkest Hour* 05:57), but it becomes very apparent in the scene where Churchill tries to come up with a speech after he agrees with Halifax to consider entering into peace talks (*Darkest Hour* 1:21:00-1:23:45). In this scene, Churchill finds himself unable to accurately describe Hitler, leading him into a series of unintelligible mumbling and name-calling. When he realises that Mrs Leyton has stopped writing, he turns to her and says "Well?", to which Mrs Leyton responds "I didn't understand you, sir [...] You were... You were mumbling". The fact that Mrs Leyton is unable to understand the words of Churchill is significant as she in this case can be understood to represent the public. Although working closely with Churchill himself, and providing support to the Prime Minister, she is not allowed into the map room and thus kept in the dark regarding the nation's pressing situation: "No-one tells us anything. It's all classified and we hear scraps and it's worse than knowing nothing" (*Darkest Hour* 1:10:50). Mrs. Leyton becomes a representative of the public who is also denied access to information, and the scene depicts how not knowing what is going on, creates frustration and fear. Thus, in order for Churchill to establish a connection with the public, he needs to provide them with information regarding the state of the nation.

The film, then, not only addresses the debate on whether the nation should participate in peace negotiations with Hitler or not, but also raises the question of whether the public should be informed about the potential dangers facing the country. Like Mrs Leyton, the general public is also kept in the dark regarding the nation's potential dismay. As Churchill observes the public from his car, his driver remarks: "Hardly seems like there's a war on at all" (*Darkest Hour* 14:35), highlighting the fundamental problem: the unawareness of the imminent threat of invasion among the public. However, after Mrs. Leyton expresses her sorrow about the unknown fate of the soldiers and her frustration at being kept in the dark, Churchill invites her to the map room for the first time (*Darkest Hour* 1:11:06-1:13:03). This scene comes to depict the first time Churchill addresses the situation to someone outside of his War Cabinet. Mrs.

Leyton, who previously (seemingly) struggled to understand Churchill, now gets a simple and comprehensible report on events and answers to her questions. Despite Mrs. Leyton's occupation setting her apart from the general public, she still represents them as she is also unaware of the situation. Over time, she does however gradually develop a fondness for Churchill. She serves as an intermediary between Churchill and the general public, and Churchill realises that truthful communication with Mrs Leyton, and later the public, is preferable to keeping them in the dark.

The realisation of the importance of truthful communication becomes further relevant in the underground scene (*Darkest Hour* 1:35:36-1:41:23). The underground scene in *Darkest Hour* is significant because it depicts Churchill's effort to listen to his public. After realising that transparency is important when communicating with the public, and being urged by the King to listen to them, he wants to know what their thoughts are regarding the imminent threat of invasion: should they stand their ground or talk with Hitler? At first the people seem frightened and scared of him, but after a while, through humour, Churchill manages to connect with them and gauge their mood. He asks: “The British people. What is their mood? Is it confident? [...] if the worst came to pass, and the enemy were to appear on these streets, what would you do?”. The response is “fight”. Then he lays out the alternative “And what... what if I put it to you all... that we might, if we ask nicely, receive very favourable terms from Mr. Hitler if we enter into a peace deal with him right now? What would you say to that?”, to which they unanimously respond “never!”. This scene highlights Churchill's effort to listen to his public and to bring them together in their shared determination to defend their country, just as the King advised him to do. Churchill then realises that, although he agreed to it under pressure from his War Cabinet, he cannot enter the negotiations as it would not only be in opposition to his own firm beliefs, but also to the nation's will.

After arriving at Westminster in the following scene, he then seeks to speak to and address his Outer Cabinet – as he has not done so since the formation of his government (*Darkest Hour* 1:41:55). On the way there, he also invites some younger Members of Parliament and anyone that would care to join. In a room packed with politicians, Churchill finds himself in the middle, speaking to his colleagues. He provides them with the context that the War Cabinet, at this very moment, is drafting out documents that lay out a willingness to enter into negotiations with Hitler. However, he then finds the list of names of the people he met on the underground and explains what the general mood of the public is – the people that the politicians represent. After

laying out what Britain could look like if they negotiate with Hitler – painting a picture of Buckingham Palace and the Parliament draped in Swastikas – an MP shouts “never!” (*Darkest Hour* 1:45:01-1:45:20): which are the same words as those of the people on the underground. Churchill gets the MPs cheering, and they look resolute and ready to fight.

I have heard you! [...] it appears to be your will also, that if this long island story of ours is to end at last, then it should only be when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground! (*Darkest Hour* 1:45:20).

For the first time in the film, Churchill gets the opinion from someone outside of his War Cabinet where the film has depicted him to be alone. Here he gets support, and he realises that the general mood of the public is supported by the Outer Cabinets as well, thus depicting both the public and the politicians’ mood to be the same: brave, filled with courage and ready to defend their island. When the film then ends with Churchill’s famous “We shall fight” speech (*Darkest Hour* 1:49:00-1:54:32), it depicts a whole nation united. They are united in their will to fight, defend, and save their nation from the threat of Nazi Germany. When the spotlight from the ceiling shines down at Churchill, he is no longer alone. Although the war is far from over, Churchill and his nation’s resilience and bravery create resolution to the darkest hour while sparking a light in their will to fight.

Through its own assertion of history and the depiction of Churchill’s resilience and gradual developing relationship with both the King and the public, *Darkest Hour* thus functions as a source of historical knowledge. Although the accounts and on-screen displays are fictional, it produces a representation of factual events which gives the audience a sense of historical verisimilitude. The plausible formal surface provides a realistic story world, and although there are some historical laxities in the narrative which have been considered, the representation offers a product which is in line with the collective memory of the events: Britain, with Churchill in charge, stood firm and united against the Nazis, and managed to succeed in their nation’s finest hour.

## Chapter 3: Operation Dynamo from the Soldiers' and Public's Perspective in *Dunkirk*

Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* is a historical war film which depicts the events of Operation Dynamo primarily through the soldiers' and public's perspective. As *Dunkirk* is based on a historical event, it too falls under the genre of historical film as a mimesis of the story lived in some region of the world. With a focus on the sensory experience, *Dunkirk* places itself in the category of art cinema. This form of cinema focuses on style more than on exteriority, and has an episodic plot in which actions may be secondary to impressions or state of mind, as opposed to the alternative linear plot seen in most mainstream cinema (Nichols 138, 139), such as *Darkest Hour*. The focus in this subcategory of Hollywood film, is on the characters' thoughts and feelings, which take precedence over dramatic action and plot (Nichols 138). The historical knowledge in *Dunkirk*, then, is not necessarily mediated through coherent diegesis and a linear plot, but rather with an emphasis on showing the emotions and impressions of the soldiers and the public.

To establish its referential link to history, the film starts quite similar to *Darkest Hour* by providing context through intertitles:

DUNKIRK  
THE ENEMY HAVE DRIVEN THE BRITISH AND FRENCH  
ARMIES TO THE SEA.  
TRAPPED AT DUNKIRK, THEY AWAIT THEIR FATE.  
HOPING FOR DELIVERANCE.  
FOR A MIRACLE.

(*Dunkirk* 0:20-1:37)

Although not interweaved with archival footage, this opening prologue asserts the film's status as history by immediately providing the audience with the context for the scenes and events that is to follow. The use of a written prologue is commonly used in historical films as it contextualises the drama in the historical past, in an attempt to create a narrative transition which stitches the events depicted in the film to written accounts of history (Stubbs 21). Although it is not explicitly stated to be based on true events, the written intertitles implicitly



tell the audience that the following one hour and thirty-five minutes are to be perceived as an account of true historical events.

In the same opening sequence of scenes where Nolan changes between written intertitles and footage of soldiers outside of the Dunkirk perimeter, there are leaflets falling from the sky. When the soldier catches one of them, it reads “We surround you – Surrender” (*Dunkirk* 0:53), showing both the soldier and the audience the situation at hand: they are completely surrounded and trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk and left standing alone with their backs against the English Channel. During the war, such propaganda leaflets were commonly used and disseminated over enemy troops as a medium of psychological warfare (Øyen and De Fleur 144). The first image below shows an example of such a leaflet dropped over allied troops during the events of the Dunkirk entrapment (‘German Propaganda Leaflet Dunkirk’), and it is quite similar to the one used by Nolan in *Dunkirk* (*Dunkirk* 0:53):



**Figure 2: 'German Propaganda Leaflet' and leaflet used in *Dunkirk* (0:53)**

One key difference between the real leaflet and the mediated version, however, is that the one used in the film includes the location of Dover, home to the British soldiers. Whereas the Nazis in Dunkirk at the time probably did not want to leave the allied troops with any hope of a safe return home, the leaflet used in the film includes Dover as it presents the exposition of the narrative that is to unfold. By including the home, the leaflet shows what the movie will be about: getting the soldiers home to Dover from the French beaches of Dunkirk, and

simultaneously, just as *Darkest Hour*, implies from the very beginning that the movie will have a triumphant ending.

Furthermore, the use of the leaflet creates a credible historical link to the past by adding “real” and realistic objects into the story world. The attention to visual detail represents “the past by accumulating visual evidence which evoke a sense of historical period and overwhelm potential laxities in the narrative” (Stubbs 38). Historical details can, in other words, provide realism to the historical narrative, and is therefore an important part of the film’s *mise-en-scène*. Using elements such as leaflets, which were common at the time as means of propaganda and psychological warfare, thus become visual evidence of the past and places the film in the temporal-spatial *histosphere* as it models and mediates the physically experienced world through a sense of historical verisimilitude.

The film and its characters, however, are essentially fictional. Nolan aims to mediate the past, not through authentic accounts of the past, but by providing an intense and vicarious sensory experience through visuals and sound. This is for example seen through the very scant and limited dialogue of the soldiers, which enables them to be perceived as real although they are fictional, since there is no need for falsification: they are simply a representation of all the soldiers who found themselves on the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940, and not a mediation of one specific historical character as seen in *Darkest Hour*. There are no representations of backstories, flashbacks or memories on the part of the characters either. Instead the film relies on first hand shots from their experiences of the events, and thus focusing upon “bodily pressures occurring in the moment” (Hunt 328).

Through discontinuity editing, the film has a nonlinear and noncoherent plot. In contrast to continuity, discontinuity refers to the sudden leap between shots in order to disrupt the coherence of a scene (Nichols 47). The diegesis consists of three separate narrative strands each introduced by intertitles and each arching over different temporal spaces. First, there is “1. THE MOLE | one week” (*Dunkirk* 5:57), working across a whole week and focusing on the action on the beach where desperate soldiers try to evacuate, sometimes under heavy air attack. Then there is “2. THE SEA | one day” (*Dunkirk* 7:52), operating across one day depicting the story of the boat *Moonstone* and its crew – a fictional, yet representative small-group story of the patriotic and brave minds of the public coming to help their troops. And finally, there is “3. THE AIR | one hour” (*Dunkirk* 8:38), which across one hour depicts three Spitfire pilots and

their battles against enemy aircrafts over and around Dunkirk. Although the three narrative strands operate in different temporal spaces, they sometimes briefly overlap as they provide different perspectives to the incidents they depict – a Nolan signature feature which, according to Corner, fractures any attempt at following one coherent, linear “story of Dunkirk” (Corner 3).

Nonlinear plots like the one depicted in *Dunkirk* can often be confusing and especially unpredictable (Dancyger 393) as they move back and forth both in time and space. The film therefore relies on parallel editing, which is often used to create suspense, but also moves the viewer from a state of confusion about the plot and depicted incidents, to an eventual realisation of how the stories and characters are connected together (Nichols 145). In the passage of scenes between the 9:42 and 15:17 minute mark, Nolan rapidly cuts between all three narrative strands as if they were happening simultaneously (*Dunkirk* 9:42-15:17). At THE MOLE the two soldiers see a potential escape route by carrying a wounded soldier onto a hospital ship, at THE SEA the *Moonstone* crew sails off with its captain Mr Dawson, his son Peter, and the young boy George, just before the navy acquires their vessel, and in THE AIR the Spitfire pilots are told they need to help the evacuation in Dunkirk even though “Dunkirk’s so far, why can’t they load at Calais?” (*Dunkirk* 13:14). Although there is continuity in these scenes through the intense and increasingly stressing soundscape added to the background, unifying the strands across timelines “as part of an ongoing sensory experience” (Hunt 326), the passage shows how Nolan rapidly cuts from one narrative strand to another through editing. This creates suspense, but also a degree of confusion, as rapid parallel editing is unpredictable when one is not aware of the context and the developmental plot in each narrative strand.

The use of discontinuity and parallel editing does not only cause confusion for viewers, but it also mediates an impression of chaos, and thus depicts the historical event as something chaotic, dramatic, and difficult to control. Despite accomplishing it through fictional rather than factual narratives, *Dunkirk* mediates a chaotic representation of the historical past where the ambiguous chronological time conveys the topological intensity of warfare,

whereby a few seconds can feel interminable (lying face down in the sand, arms covering the head, while a series of bombs drop and explode in ever increasing proximity); hours might feel like days (cramped inside the hull of a beached trawler, waiting for the tide to change in order to launch an escape); and days might feel like hours or minutes (pursuing attempt after attempt to leave the Dunkirk beach in a near-constant high stress situation) (Hunt 324).

Reading Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsay's dispatch on the events provided to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on 18 June 1940, it becomes evident that chaos and a lack of order were common within the formations of soldiers during the early stages of the evacuation (Grehan and Mace 107), which is an effect Nolan achieves through the depiction of chaos and confusion. In an interview with Time Magazine, Nolan expressed how he wanted the film not to provide an omniscient viewing experience:

Films have a sophisticated level of grammar that's developed over the hundred years of cinema to be able to tell the audience everything and have them know much more than the characters. I actually wanted to take a step back and say, "What would you know if you were actually stuck on that beach?" The more I read firsthand accounts, the more apparent it became that part of the terror, part of the real sense of fear and isolation and vulnerability of these men, was not knowing what was happening. Not knowing, lining up on the beach out to sea, if somebody was going to come and get them or not (Nolan in Berman).

The notable lack of establishing shots with a God's eye view, which in films are used to provide overview for a scene and to locate the action in a wider context (Nichols 41), further emphasise the chaotic immersion of the film. *Dunkirk* shows how a film can surround the audience with impressions and a hystosphical experience. Nolan places the camera with the characters in a conscious attempt to capture what it would really be like if one were there oneself. During the THE MOLE strand, the camera is placed at the beach with the soldiers, in THE AIR it is either mounted on the plane or shot from the point of view of the pilot, and during THE SEA there are little to no shots from outside the boat. As Nolan himself points out, "Everything is shot from the point of view of the characters" (Nolan in Berman). Focusing on the audience's sensory experience, the film addresses the whole body and surrounds its audience so that they can physically feel it, which in turn creates an immersive experience of being in the temporal spatial *histosphere*. By placing the camera so that everything is shown from the point of view of the characters, Nolan achieves the same effect as Wright in *Darkest Hour*, where Churchill's point of view draws the audience closer to his emotional state. The story is told not from above, but rather from the perspective of those who lived the stories. Although fictional, it thus provides an authentic account of how it was, portraying the events as chaotic, frightening, and permeated with a sense of collective unawareness.

Furthermore, the chaotic immersion that is unveiled through the camera lens shows a state of desperation. After an unsuccessful evacuation where a destroyer is sunk by an enemy torpedo, the soldiers find themselves washed up yet again on the beach. As they lie there, they witness groups of soldiers who, perhaps due to the lack of information that help was on its way, or just

out of sheer desperation, try to evacuate themselves using stranded row boats (*Dunkirk* 47:28-48:11). Through the use of jump cuts – where the shift from one shot to another “fails to maintain smooth continuity in space and time” (Nichols 46), and becomes a powerful tool that immediately grasps the audience’s attention (Dancyger 119, 121) – the scene shows how the group of soldiers in an act of desperation try to save their own lives, but eventually come to the realisation that the attempt is hopeless. The shot jumps from them trying their best to get the boat afloat in the shallow water and steep waves, to them returning with their heads down and in a state of despair.

The following scene then depicts a soldier walking out into the water by himself. While dropping his gun to the ground and taking off his helmet, he wades out into the water with a purpose, but without any hope, and perhaps intention, of coming home alive (*Dunkirk* 48:15-48:51). This is seen by the three washed-up soldiers sitting at the shore of the beach, observing. Shifting from their point of view, the camera then focuses on one of the soldiers in a zooming close-up of his face, revealing his emotions. The soldier in focus knows that there is nothing he can do to help the other wading soldier, and thus sits quietly and observes the man. The close-up of his facial expression shows the audience his emotional state and focuses the attention on the immersion of what he is seeing. In this scene, it is not the plot that is important, but rather the emotions and experience of the young soldier who realises that death might be inevitable – one way or another.

In general, historical film relies on the Theory of Mind which in psychology refers to “the human capacity to infer other mind-states based on a folk understanding of how minds work” (William 62). When the audience sees the close-up of a young soldier’s face who watches a fellow soldier commit suicide, they react by trying to make sense of what they are seeing. When the focus is on the characters’ emotions, so is the emphasis in the audience’s minds as they, however unconsciously, try to comprehend the vicarious emotional dynamic between what they are seeing and what they are experiencing. When watching the historical representation of the past, they also get access to the depiction of the emotions of the past, which in turn leads to the important aspect of perspective-taking. Both the taking of different perspectives, as well as an emphatic reaction can lead to “a broadening of one’s horizons and a deeper understanding of the world beyond the screen, through a combination of strong emotion and focused mental activity” (William 157). Through the Theory of Mind, historical films thus not only deliver a historical representation of facts and representation, but they also deliver a psychological

realism to which most viewers can relate (William 101) – which is what *Dunkirk* offers its audience through the emphasis on an audio-visual sensory experience.

In fact, although *Dunkirk* is a historical war film, it generally does not rely on combat scenes, but rather on the immersive sensory experience that the events provided for the young soldiers. As Nolan points out himself, *Dunkirk* is not a battle, but a fight for survival:

Dunkirk is not really a battle—it's an evacuation, a retreat. It's a fight for survival, and it immediately drew me to the language of suspense, and the thriller, rather than all-out combat. It really was a question of, can they pull off this miraculous feat before having to either surrender or be annihilated by the Germans? That was the choice: surrender or annihilation (Nolan in Berman).

However, despite combat scenes in general being omitted from the mediation, the film does include scenes of war and shows how it affects the young soldiers. This is especially shown through the heavy air attacks that the soldiers sustained during their evacuation. According to Vice Admiral Ramsey's dispatch, intensive air attacks were one of five strategies the Germans used to frustrate the operation:

during the 1<sup>st</sup> June all ships in Dunkirk, off the beaches, or in the approach channels, were subjected every two hours to an unprecedented scale of air attack by aircraft in such numbers that the R.A.F. were unable to deal with the situation (Grehan and Mace 105).

Throughout the film there are several instances where Nolan depicts how relentless the enemy air attacks were. Once settled onto the beach in the beginning, the young soldier finds himself immediately in the presence of enemy bomber jets targeting the sitting ducks at the sands of Dunkirk (*Dunkirk* 6:00-7:43), and while embarking wounded soldiers onto a hospital ship at the mole, chaos ensues as German fighter- and bomber jets attack both the ship and the helpless soldiers on the mole (*Dunkirk* 24:24-27:13). Both instances show the sheer desperation and helplessness the soldiers feel as they cannot escape attacks from the air: their only hope is not being hit. While some soldiers desperately try to shoot at the enemy aircrafts, they quickly realise that the enemies are superior in the sky, leaving them frustrated, angry, and scared: "Where's the bloody airforce?!" (*Dunkirk* 7:22). The same emotions are depicted in the close-up of commander Bolton as an aircraft is about to attack once again towards the end of the movie (*Dunkirk* 1:24:49-1:25:39). The close-up of his face reveals his emotions, and at one point, just before the aircraft is shot down, he looks to accept his faith as there is nothing he can do to prevent the inevitable.

Through *THE AIR*, *Dunkirk* offers an important perspective of the efforts of the R.A.F. during the evacuation. While there was frustration regarding their lack of help and puny efforts – caused by the superiority of the Germans in the air and orders to wait offshore for the troops – the Commanding Officers of many ships, in their reports, praised the gallantry shown by the out-numbered airmen who in fact managed to take down 262 enemy aircrafts and having a total of nearly 5000 flying hours over Dunkirk between 26 May and 4 June (Grehan and Mace 106). The importance of the R.A.F. is highlighted in the film and after Farrier (the last standing Spitfire pilot) successfully shoots down the German aircraft which were about to shoot at Bolton and the disembarking soldiers on the mole, they get the recognition they deserve as all the soldiers erupt into cheers, roaring and hailing the saviour from the sky (*Dunkirk* 1:25:15-1:25:39) – a touching tribute to the efforts of the brave pilots.

One cannot, however, make a film about Dunkirk and not include any representation of the public and their perspective. The narrative strand of *THE SEA* offers this perspective as it portrays the *Moonstone* and its crew consisting of the calm and collected skipper Mr. Dawson, his son Peter, and the young boy George – a small group narrative representing all the little ships on their way to Dunkirk. This narrative strand is distinct from the other two, however, as it both starts and ends in England, “grounding the film in nationhood, in the ‘home front’ and ‘civilian-ness’” (Corner 4–5). It shows both how brave the public were to sail off in merchant vessels and small ships not equipped for war, but also how the evacuation came to be remembered as a triumph rather than a massive failure.

When the *Moonstone* crew pilot their vessel on their way to Dunkirk, they come to represent the very embodiment of nationhood and dominant patriotic values. Mr. Dawson, the calm and collected skipper, is the very personification of the Dunkirk spirit as he navigates the ship and his crew through a quiet mode of heroism in multiple acts of rescue and courage (Corner 5). When confronted by a distressed soldier they rescued, shouting “You should be at home!” urging them to turn around as they are not fit to enter war in this “pleasure boat”, Mr. Dawson calmly explains that “Well there won’t be any home if we allow thus slaughter across the Channel” (*Dunkirk* 40:19-40:48). The bravery is also depicted through the young George, who reassures Mr. Dawson and Peter that “I’ll be useful, sir” (*Dunkirk* 05:00), when embarking the boat. Although he dies on the way there in a tragic manner, he finally gets recognised as having done something useful in his life as he is mentioned in the local newspaper as “LOCAL BOY, GEORGE MILLS, JUST 17, HERO AT DUNKIRK” (*Dunkirk* 1:33:48).

THE SEA gives the promise of a home and a triumphant ending, which is depicted in the iconic scene near the end where the armada of small ships and merchant vessels arrive to rescue their troops (*Dunkirk* 1:10:00-1:12:19). As Commander Bolton says when asked what he sees through his binoculars, he sees “home” arriving, emphasising that the British public embody what they perceive as home: a place with the bravest of men and women willing to sacrifice everything in order to save and defend their own nation. Much like the case with the last standing Spitfire pilot, the arrival of help is cheered on with joy and flag-waving from those on the mole, the beach, and nearby ships. The crews on the boats are positioned on top of the decks in an almost figurine-like manner, providing for an even more emphatic tableaux sequence (Corner 5). Although the small ships in reality did not provide for the greatest numbers of the evacuation – this was done primarily by destroyers (Grehan and Mace, app.2), something which has been heavily downplayed in this mediation – they represent the effort of the public nevertheless.

This narrative strand also offers the interesting and important perspective of the immediate aftermath of the evacuation as the soldiers arrive back home hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder with the public. Going back to Admiral Ramsay’s dispatch, the disembarking of troops in England proceeded with great smoothness (Grehan and Mace 104), which is depicted in the film as the public waits for them on the disembarkation points serving tea and providing blankets (*Dunkirk* 1:27:40-1:29:32). In this sequence and in the following train ride, the austere mood of the soldiers compared to the public is notable. When a blind man says to one of the young soldiers “Well done”, he responds “All we did is survive”, before the old man assures him that “That’s enough”. Whereas the members of the public are grateful for the young boys’ efforts and just glad to have them home safe, the soldier is ashamed that he had to be rescued and cannot bear thinking of the reception that they will receive once they get back home. To his surprise, however, when arriving at Woking station, they are cheered on by the people who, very much like the soldiers cheered on the Spitfire pilot and the soldiers cheered on the arriving armada of small ships, are grateful for the efforts of the soldiers (*Dunkirk* 1:32:26-1:35:07).

The film ends with the other young soldier reciting bits of Churchill’s speech to the House of Commons on 4 June 1940:

Wars are not won by evacuations [...] But there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted [...] our thankfulness at the escape of our Army and so many men, whose loved ones have passed through an agonizing week, must not blind us to the fact that what has



happened in France and Belgium is a colossal military disaster. [...] we must expect another blow to be struck almost immediately [...] We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air [...] we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old (*Dunkirk* 1:32:26-1:35:07).

Ending the film with these words read over images of the Spitfire pilot who never got home, George in the newspapers, and the mood of the soldiers improving as they realise that they are cheered and not spit on, gives the movie a heartfelt ending. Wars are not won by evacuation, but this evacuation in particular has become a legendary myth in British national history representing their will to defend, fight, and stand up for what they believe in. What *Dunkirk* does is provide a representation of how the public and the soldiers find each other in their never-ending Dunkirk spirit, shared sacrifice, and the will to fight together.

*Dunkirk* thus provides a source to both historical knowledge and historical representation. Being a film under the category of art cinema, it focuses its attention on the emotions of the soldiers and public and depicts a representation of what it would have been like taking part in the evacuation process during the summer of 1940 – either as a soldier or a member of the public. The audience is left with an intense sensory experience which surrounds their whole body and demands an emphatic reaction. Through the conscious placement of the camera next to the soldiers and the public, showing their point of view of the events, the film captures the emotions of war. The historical knowledge is depicted, not through factual and authentic accounts of events, but rather through the impactful immersions which it portrays. Standing defenceless on the beaches, being outnumbered in the sky, or sailing off into the unknown territory of war, must have been a fearful experience for everyone involved, and it is exactly this sense of fear and hopelessness *Dunkirk* mediates through its *mise-en-scène* and *mise-en-histoire*, before ending the film with what is embedded in British collective memory as the triumphant and safe return home.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

This thesis has analysed how both Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour* (2017) and Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017), mediate the past using the historical film genre as their mode of expression. The focus for the analysis has been on the films' formal surface and how they go from formal context through *mise-en-scène* and *mise-en-histoire*, to historical knowledge. The premise for this thesis is that all history, whether it is published in a scholarly journal, a historical textbook, academic research, or mediated through film, is an interpretation of the past. History is necessarily narrative, and the historian's choice of writing is more a choice of independent preference and style, than of content. If the content of the historical representation is based on the historical past, whether on a specific historical person, an event, or both, then that representation inherits some degree of truth-value. Both *Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk*, which both depict the events of Operation Dynamo, albeit from different perspectives, do so through their modelling and figuration of the historical world. By making the past a part of the present, they become examples of historical films that can function as a source to historical knowledge and representation.

By focusing on the political machinations behind the scenes of the events leading up to Operation Dynamo, *Darkest Hour* depicts a mainstream cinema version of how Winston Churchill and the British public eventually become united through a shared sense of resilience, national pride, and Dunkirk spirit. By placing Churchill in tight and confined spaces and frames, Wright depicts an isolated Churchill who fights his battles alone but with a great and determined sense of direction and leadership. Although Churchill might be a controversial character today, he is still remembered as someone who led the nation in a time of national crisis, and is thus seen by many as one of the most eminent British heroes (J. White 106). Churchill's contribution during the Second World War is therefore embedded in the national, collective memory of the past and a reason for why he still matters today. As Hassan concludes in his essay:

Long after these current predicaments have been resolved, when the nations of the UK have left the EU, and the UK itself has been reconfigured, Winston Churchill will still be remembered for the part of his public life that really mattered, and that echoes down through the ages. It may be a caricatured, truncated Churchill, mostly missing all his sins and mistakes, but the man does matter - for he did, when it was most needed, provide leadership (Hassan 80).

As mentioned in the analysis, Churchill has been described and remembered as a man who was not deemed as an acceptable leader in times of peace by the British public, but whom in the moment of disaster would come to represent the very best of British values (Hassan 73). Although one could argue that a film about Churchill potentially should focus on his time as leader in peacetime as well, this film is not about that. It wants to portray a national triumph through strong leadership, and through its formal context, it mediates a representation of a united Britain.

*Dunkirk*, on the other hand, follows a range of fictional characters during the evacuation process of nearly the entire British army from the shores of France. Through the lens of art cinema rather than mainstream cinema, the film complements *Darkest Hour* by depicting the perspective of the soldiers and the public. Emphasising the emotions of war and focusing on providing the audience with an immersive sensory experience, the film relies on the Theory of Mind when engaging the audience with an emphatic connection to the on-screen formal context. As stated in the analysis, Nolan wanted to capture what it would really be like to be there oneself – either desperately waiting on the mole, being outnumbered in the sky, or aiding the British Royal Navy with merchant vessels and small ships. The formal context of the film thus relies on the cameras being placed next to the soldiers or shooting scenes from their point of view. There is scant dialogue and the characters in the film come to represent not specific historical persons, but rather the masses of people involved in the evacuation. Further, the film depicts the events using discontinuity editing, which not only confuses the audience at certain points with its lacking coherence, but also represents how chaotic war can be.

Nolan thus depicts a historical representation of Dunkirk. The historical knowledge is produced through the film's assertion of a credible historical experience as it portrays a realistic, yet fictional, account of events with attention to historical details. Although there are some historical laxities, the film functions as a source to the past by depicting the collective memory of Dunkirk's little ships and armada of small boats which saved the nation in their finest hour. The ending scenes, as with *Darkest Hour*, depict a united Britain as the soldiers and the public arrive home safe after a shared sacrifice. The film portrays a picture of the national heroism shown by the brave British through a representation of the perspective of those who lived the stories themselves.

The subject of historical films involves a close relationship with national identity and nationhood, and in a British context, this is very important. With the introduction of postcolonialism, a new grammar of representing the past has evolved, leading to new ways of writing history. In the ruptures between the imperial past and the liberal present, Britain has been forced to “redefine the collective self-image” (Assmann 174), and although looking back at past wartime victories is nothing new in the British collective memory, it is important to acknowledge how both *Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk* could reinforce a sense of national unity in years of postcolonial decline. They focus on a historical event which does not invoke any colonialism, but rather unity: the victory in these films is mediated through the unity of the British people through strong leadership, a courageous public, and brave soldiers.

In this context, it is important to note that, as mentioned in the introduction, a historical film will have as much to say about its present as its past. As Hassan writes, “It is not very surprising, then, that in the years of relative decline and disappointment of the post-war period, the heroism of Churchill has been invoked to inspire and provide an example of leadership” (Hassan 68), as Britain arguably finds itself in a time of uncertainty and division. The statement that historical film offers equal information of the present could be further developed to history in general: history, whether it be that of individuals or nations, reveals the contemporary society through the selection of what is studied. Nations use history to define who they are today. Which stories of the past we tell today is culturally dependent and relies both on how we want to be perceived, but also on how we want to present ourselves to others and ourselves. British cinema, with Wright and Nolan at the forefront of contemporary examples, does this by looking back at a historical event of great unity, patriotism, and national heroism.

This thesis have only analysed British cinema and their representation of a national past through the genre of historical film. With further research, it would be useful to include films from other national cinemas and see how they depict a historical event different than the British. The story of *Dunkirk* would potentially be different had it been viewed from a German or French perspective – for example with the inclusion of the 1964 French film, *Week-end à Zuydcoote*, directed by Henri Verneuil (*Week-End à Zuydcoote*) – and equally, from others within Britain as well. According to White, the creation of a shared, collective memory which is “depository of a society’s ‘knowledge’ and understanding of the past constructed in such a way as to be relevant to the present” , is a process that is happening all the time (J. White 1). Although this thesis has not included films from different national perspectives, it has analysed how different

perspectives within a nation can be depicted using historical films, and thus also shape a nation's understanding of its past. Historical films such as *Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk* are therefore examples of how a national past can be mediated in the present and made available to its audience. Since the historical film is an accessible medium available to a broader audience, it plays an important part in the processing of the cultural and collective memory of the past, and therefore functions as a source to historical knowledge and representation.

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# **Appendix**

## **Relevance of the Work for the Teaching Profession**

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As seen in the analysis of the films' formal context, both *Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk* depict a historical narrative of the evacuation of the entrapped soldiers at Dunkirk in 1940. Together, they work well in the EFL-classroom as both become a source to historical knowledge and a means of historical representation, which is an important part of the English curriculum. As students after Vg1 General studies are expected to “use different sources in a critical, appropriate and accountable manner” (Utdanningsdirektoratet Competence aims and assessment), I argue that historical films become an important source which could lead to critical thinking. One of the core elements in the Norwegian curriculum for English, is working with texts in English (Utdanningsdirektoratet). This includes everything from spoken, written, printed, digital, formal, informal, factual, fictional, contemporary, and historical texts. Students in the EFL-classroom should get plenty of opportunities to engage with a variety of different texts in order to improve their critical thinking and reflection. Furthermore, texts offer students the ability to acquire language, as well as knowledge of society and culture. Film, which is a form of text in that it can be referred to as literature on screen, thus become not only a valid mode of teaching, but also an important and encouraged one.

Drawing on interviews with 18 Norwegian English teachers, Anja Bakken highlights four assumptions about the learning value of films: the referential, emotional, compensatory, and language value (Bakken 8). In this analysis, it is the two former which has the most significance as a film's historical referential link provides information and a sense of “realism that is necessary if pupils are to relate to events in history or the lives of people in other parts of the world” (Bakken 11), and the emotional value provides a framework for understanding how a film can have an emotional impact on students when engaging with the learning material. It is, however, important to emphasise that with the emotional value a film can have, it also appears to have an important compensatory dimension “in the sense that what cannot be understood through words, can be understood emotionally” (Bakken 12). In other words, with its emotional impact, a film can fill gaps in the referential value as the students engage in a more active way than perhaps would have been the case if one only used less engaging sources to historical knowledge and representation. The value of this project, therefore, stretches beyond the concrete knowledge potential of the two films I have investigated, and includes more general aspects that are relevant for my work as a teacher.

## Works Cited:

- Bakken, Anja Synnøve. 'When Teachers Talk About Films: An Investigation Into Some Aspects of English Teachers' Discursive Practices'. *Acta Didactica Norge*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–25. *NTNU Open*, <https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/handle/11250/2434527>.
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